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January 24, 1978

The Honorable Cyrus R. Vance
Secretary of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Vance:

As you know, the State Department has started consulting with the Congress on the proposed sale of 60 F-15 aircraft to Saudi Arabia. We have grave reservations about the advisability of supplying the most advanced fighter bomber in the world to Saudi Arabia. There are several reasons why we consider such a sale unwise.

Sixty F-15's would destabilize the Arab-Israeli balance of power. The operation of such an aircraft by the Saudi Air Force would seriously enlarge the threat of an aerial strike against Israeli military and civilian targets. The Saudi airbase at Tabuk is only 150 miles from Israel's major southern port of Eilat.

We have no desire to harm our good relations with the Government of Saudi Arabia and we appreciate the constructive role that they have played in efforts to secure a peaceful settlement. However, we cannot overlook the possibility that these aircraft might be transferred to other Arab governments in the event new hostilities break out. It must be remembered that Saudi Arabia has allowed Egyptian pilots to train on American-supplied F-5E fighter planes, despite the terms of the sale.

The absorptive capacity of the Saudi Air Force is not sufficiently advanced to fully assimilate as many as 60 F-15's. Yet, even if operated at only 50% efficiency, there would be a quantum jump in the Saudi capability to launch an attack. The real defense needs of Saudi Arabia can be adequately met by other types of interceptors. The F-5 system, which will be completed in the early 1980's, and the improved Hawk missile force would furnish Saudi Arabia with a fully dependable defense shield.

Moreover, the contemplated sale of the F-15's runs counter to the President's arms sales policy as enunciated in PRM-12. The transfer of the F-15's would impel other countries in the Persian Gulf to match the greatly enlarged Saudi striking power, thus leading to a dangerous escalation of the regional arms race.

The uncertain status of the suspended Middle East negotiations requires that no action be taken that would jeopardize a resumption of the talks. In addition, the Foreign Assistance Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is preparing a major study of the proposed sale. We firmly believe that this is not the time to agree to the sale of such potent and sophisticated weapons to Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Secretary, at the very least, we strongly urge you to withhold the submission of the letter of offer until such time as the present uncertainty surrounding the peace talks has ended.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

Frank Church

Richard (Dick) Stone

Joseph R. Biden

Claiborne Pell

Paul S. Sarbanes

Clifford P. Case

Dick Clark